

4-2011

Ebook Approval Plans: Integration to Meet User Needs

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Publication Info

Published in *Computers in Libraries*, ed. Dick Kaser, Volume 31, Issue 3, 2011, pages 15-18.

Buckley, M., & Tritt, D. (2011). Ebook approval plans: Integration to meet user needs. *Computers in Libraries* 31(3), 15-18.

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Computers in Libraries magazine can be viewed at <http://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/default.shtml>

This article can also be viewed from the Computers in Libraries website, here: http://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/apr11/Buckley_Tritt.shtml



Ebook Approval Plans

Integration to Meet User Needs

By Matthew Buckley and Deborah Tritt

Walk through an academic library today and you will no longer see droves of students with their noses in books. Computers, netbooks, and tablet computers litter student workspaces. Computer labs are overflowing. Students are consuming information through their electronic portals and are increasingly accessing materials from home. So as we develop our library collections, we must be conscious of how and where our students are accessing their information.

Within academic library collections, electronic journals are a mainstay. Ebooks, on the other hand, have established themselves as a viable alternative to the print book more slowly.

The growing acceptance and prevalence of ebooks cannot be ignored. As libraries continue to build their collections, ebooks play an increasingly larger role in collection development decisions.

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Libraries that plan on systematically incorporating ebooks into their collections need to determine how to best accommodate this new format. Their chief concerns are how to balance simultaneous print and ebook acquisitions, as well as how to integrate ebook acquisition into collection development workflows.

Nova Southeastern University's (NSU) Alvin Sherman Library, Research, and Information Technology Center's solution to some of these questions arrived in the form of an ebook approval plan piloted with our main book vendor, Coutts Information Services, an Ingram Content company. In 2008, we began to address how we could best meet our users' needs for ebooks and manage the dual integration of print books and ebooks into our collection and acquisition workflows. The library approached Coutts to see if it would be possible to start an ebook approval plan that is similar to our print approval plan.

Why Did We Decide to Pilot an Ebook Approval Plan?

The Alvin Sherman Library is uniquely situated as both a private academic library and a library that serves the public of Broward County, Fla. The library possesses a further distinction of serving a sizable distance student population with thousands of students enrolled in a variety of different programs.

Both authors of this article have ties to the Alvin Sherman Library—Matthew Buckley is reference librarian and subject specialist for the arts and humanities while Deborah Tritt was subject specialist for the social sciences before she moved to her current position as instruction/reference librarian and assistant professor at the University of South Carolina. As subject selectors for the academic community, we had the task of acquiring materials for both our local and distance student populations. To best support the off-campus students and online courses, we decided to experiment with an ebook approval plan.

In 2008, we began a pilot ebook approval plan, which ran alongside of our print approval plan. Since our main concern, with regard to ebook acquisition, centered on our off-campus student population, we focused our pilot efforts on some of our largest distance programs and our largest populations of nontraditional students. This pilot program also involved the analysis of a number of variables. Some of the factors studied were the total number of ebook titles available, an average ebook price, an identification of ebook publishers, and estimated publication lag times. Coutts provided the distribution structure and designed online tools to facilitate the approval plan. We provided recommendations, feedback, and the user perspective on the usefulness and usability of the approval plan structure and tools.

The pilot ebook approval plan was based on a list of specific publishers within the fields of education (L), psychology (BF), computer science (QA76) and library science (Z). The pilot occurred for several months during the library's 2008–2009 fiscal year. At the end of the pilot project in 2009, we expanded the ebook approval plan to comprehensively cover a range of disciplines from computer science to education, business, and psychology. The plan was also modified to include more publishers of electronic content.

Ebook Approval Plan Implementation

Based on the model of a traditional approval plan, an ebook approval plan is a strategy for acquiring ebooks in a systematic way. In other words, an ebook approval plan is a method of automatically acquiring ebooks based on certain established parameters, including call number, price, and publisher.

Our ebook approval plan functioned like a standard publisher-based print approval plan. Subject and nonsubject parameters were set, and these controls allowed us to specify what ebooks arrived automatically. The benefits of

the controls are numerous and well-suited to the unique publication characteristics of ebooks. This selection control allowed us to choose subject areas, such as computer science, that might publish more electronic materials and specify publishers that distribute more ebooks in these subject areas.

Underlying all of the benefits to the selectors and acquisition staff was the core goal of providing an increased number of ebooks to our off-campus student population. For NSU, we wanted to include academic areas that had large distance populations. Through the use of subject and nonsubject parameters, we were able to meet this need. For example, the education programs at NSU have many students who take courses online or away from the main campus. Ebooks about education were a prime target area. Within education, other parameters were set up, such as price and publisher, to help filter out what was wanted.

Once the groundwork was laid, the pilot ebook approval plan began. The subject selectors received individual title records within a folder in their Coutts Oasis (online ordering program) account titled Review Approval Books. Ebooks that matched the parameters appeared in a queue. Selectors were then able to accept, reject, or defer the acquisition of the ebook.

Selectors only saw the bibliographic record for an individual approval ebook for a set period of time. In that time, selectors could take a number of actions. The selector could accept the ebook, and we would receive the item (see Figure 1). If the item was rejected, the ebook would not be received. If the ebook was marked as a slip, it would be removed from the approval plan queue, but it could still be bought at a later time as a firm order or purchased as a print title. If no action was taken within the set period of time, the ebook automatically arrived on approval. It was important for selectors to monitor the ebook approval plan periodically.

Once an ebook was accepted on the approval plan, Coutts notified and sent

the library a batch of MARC records with invoice data that was embedded within a MARC field. Using Innovative Interfaces, Inc. (III) tools, our technical services department would generate bibliographic and order records to complete the process. Upon completion, our users had access to the titles through the MyiLibrary platform, and individual records for the ebooks were included in our library catalog (see Figure 2). Students could use the catalog as a single access point to search for and discover ebooks alongside print books.

Benefits of the Ebook Approval Plan

One of the major benefits of the ebook approval plan over a traditional approval plan was the power of the selector to refuse a title on approval and preview the full text of the ebook prior to its acquisition. Combining the model of the approval plan with the benefits of immediate access to preview the item gave us considerable control in regulating the purchases. However, if one did not monitor his or her ebook lists, one might accidentally acquire titles that may have been rejected otherwise.

The interface was fairly easy to use and understand. Coutts Oasis provided bibliographic information and the ability to preview the full text of individual ebooks. To accommodate the ebook approval plan, Coutts provided drop-down options to make choices. Users had the ability to approve the title, remove the title, or defer the item with simple controls.

One long-term benefit of the ebook approval plan was that it provided future opportunities for fine-tuning and growth. To better refine the approval plan, one could study the rejected titles and determine patterns or characteristics that might warrant adjustments. One could also see which ebooks had the highest usage on the plan and make decisions based on those statistics to better develop future approval plans.

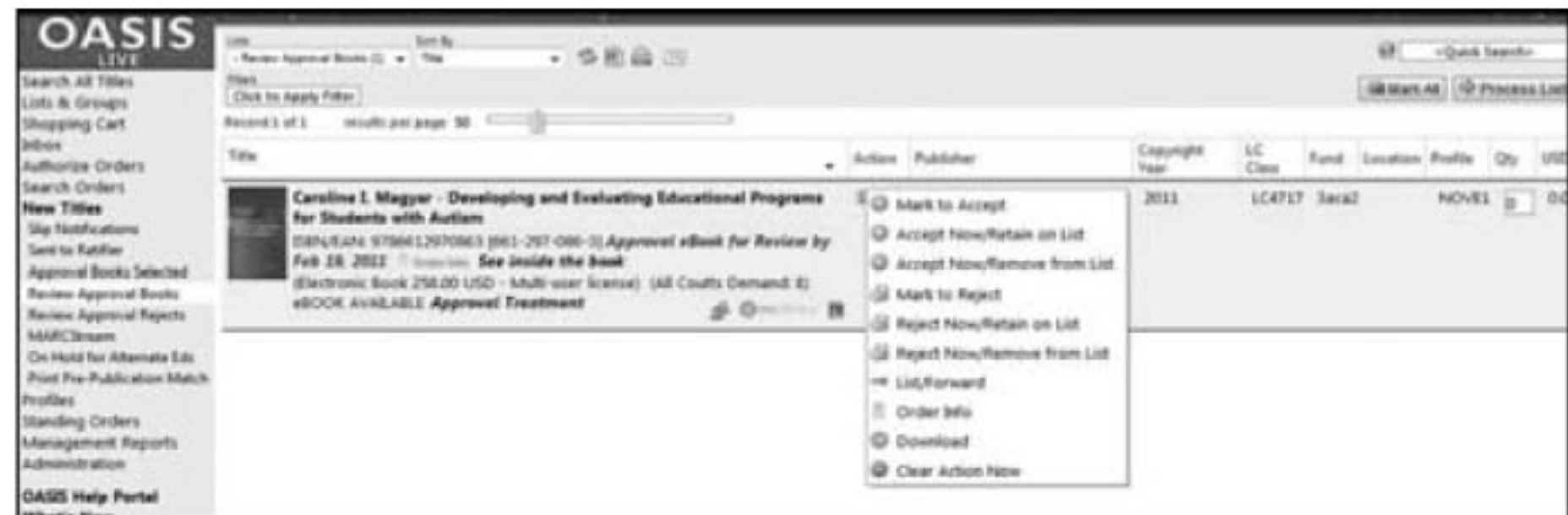


Figure 1: The selector makes the final decision regarding whether to accept or reject specific ebooks.



Figure 2: An ebook record from our catalog

Major Considerations

One of the major considerations in the design of the ebook approval plan concerned the logistics of running the ebook approval plan alongside a print approval plan while avoiding duplication. Additionally, Coutts provided an option to own the ebook content rather than simply leasing the materials. It also allowed for flexibility in other areas, such as deciding whether to use multiuser or single-user access to the ebook. For our population, multiuser access was more appropriate.

Further complicating ebook acquisition is the reality that most ebooks become available after the print form is released. To resolve this situation, it was decided that a print approval book would be held for a specific period of time to accommodate for the publisher's delay in providing the ebook version. If an ebook did not arrive within a designated time frame, the print approval book would be delivered. For the pilot, an estimated delay of 3 months was used. The formulation for this delay period was based on stud-

ies of individual publishers and different disciplines to find an average print-to-ebook delay period.

The budget for the ebook approval plan required a mixture of educated guesswork and calculation. A specific part of the acquisitions budget was set up with a certain amount of money to be spent on the ebook approval plan. The uncertainty in this equation was the amount of money that should be set aside in the ebook approval plan budget. There was no way of reasonably projecting the volume of ebooks matching our parameters, so there was no way of precisely knowing the total cost. Our solution was to create a spending limit. This limit was based on an educated guess of average prices and what was previously published as an ebook in our specified subject areas.

Another pricing factor was the difference in cost between a print copy and an ebook copy. The multiuser ebook price is almost always more expensive than the print copy, and sometimes it is double the price. The ebook approval plan does allow for pricing caps, but when the ebook is more expensive than

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the print book, selectors often purchase fewer titles.

Personal preference also played a factor. Students and faculty members in many of the humanities disciplines, for example, are mostly on campus at NSU and continue to show a preference for the physical book format. These issues continue to create a challenging situation when selecting material formats.

The ebook approval plan must address these factors, which weigh into a library's collection development strategy. Simultaneous publishing (or lack thereof), overall lack of ebooks in certain subject areas, and publisher availability limit the comprehensiveness of the ebook approval plan. Some disciplines, such as science and technology, release ebooks on a regular basis. Humanities fields, such as history or art, are not as suitable for ebook publication. Also, the lag time between the availability of print and electronic versions was a major constraint. It should be pointed out that all of these issues are still concerns today.

Limitations of the Ebook Approval Plan

The ebook approval plan was subject to several external factors that we had to consider, along with some limitations within the plan itself. For example, by using one main vendor for ebook approvals, we were limited to the publishers that contract with that vendor. Coutts has tried to ensure that most ebook publishers are included, but sometimes our access to certain publishers has been restricted. In addition, there are consistent limitations and trends within the publishing industry that affect the functionality of the approval plans.

Unless simultaneous publishing becomes an industry standard for publishers, the full potential of an ebook approval plan is limited. One must either

wait for an ebook copy to become available or buy a print copy. This situation affects many of the subject disciplines.

Another limitation of the ebook approval plan is that ebooks are web-based and only housed on the MyiLibrary platform. Unfortunately, within this platform, the ebooks are not downloadable to a device such as a Kindle or a NOOK. According to a representative at Coutts, there are plans to have downloadable ebooks in MyiLibrary.

Finally, it is important to note that building a robust collection from ebooks alone is difficult, if not impossible. The nature of an approval plan, and the nature of ebooks, is such that they provide access to recently released titles electronically.

Did It Work?

The ultimate question for us is, "Did it work?" The bottom line is that the ebook approval plan proved to be our best option for quickly meeting our students' needs, and it integrated well into our existing collection development and acquisition workflows.

Measuring the direct success between ebook use and an increase in title purchasing is subject to many factors, including an increase in the number of titles and increased acceptance of ebooks as a format. However, it is evident that we are meeting our users' needs. NSU's MyiLibrary session numbers have risen annually, from 3,959 sessions in 2008 to 12,662 sessions in 2010 (see Figure 3).

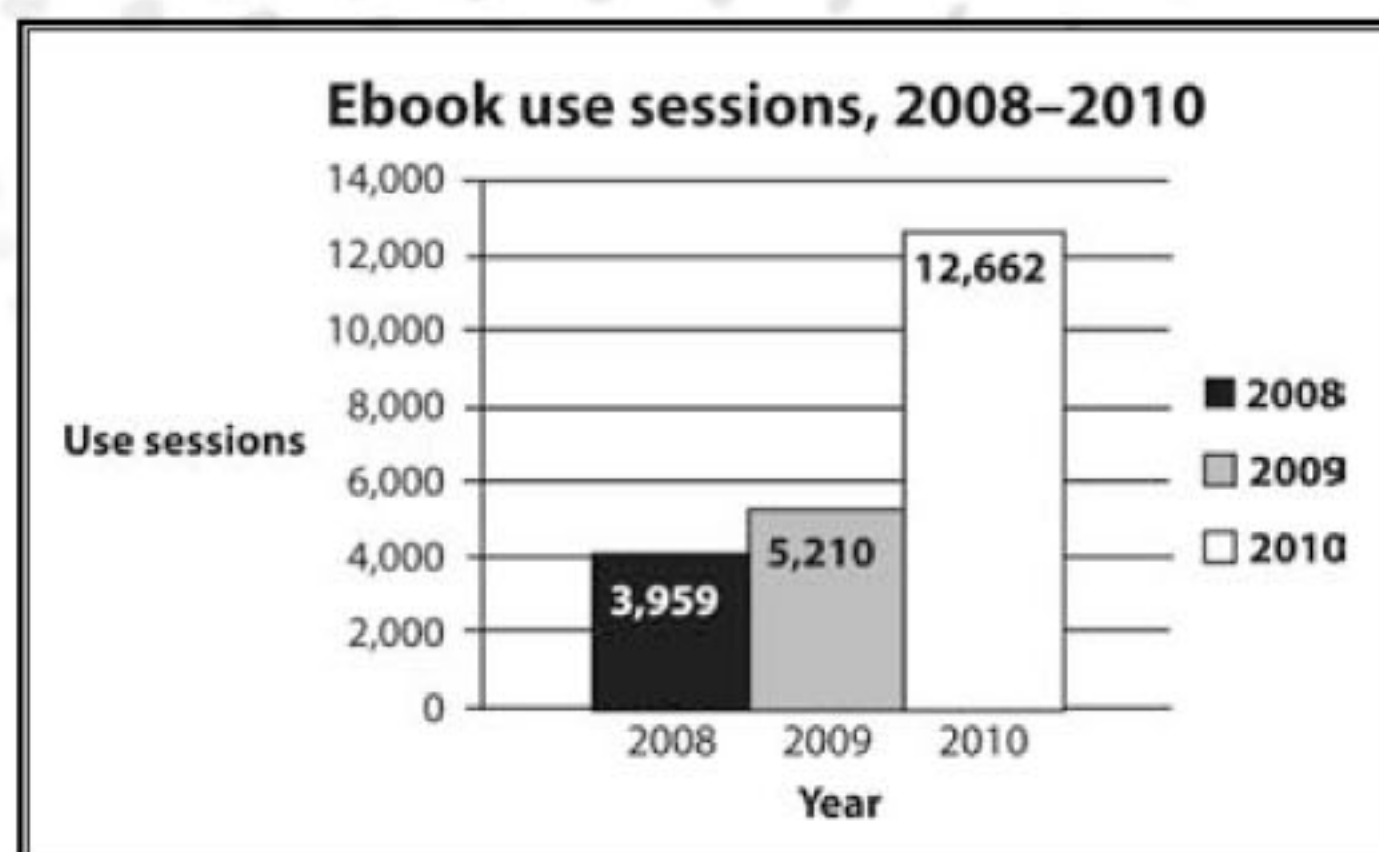


Figure 3: This graph indicates that the ebook approval plan assisted us in making the right e-decisions for our users.

Conclusion

It is important to note that inherent to the decision to undertake an ebook approval plan is an understanding of whether ebooks are appropriate for your patrons. Prior to a consideration of an ebook approval plan, it is important to perform an assessment of the appropriateness of this acquisition model for your individual library.

Ebook approval plans are not for every library. But for the Alvin Sherman Library at NSU, it was the right decision.

The ebook approval plan, despite some limitations, has been an effective tool for continuously integrating ebook content into predefined areas that needed online materials. We found the ebook approval plan to be an easy option to filter content, offer flexibility with simple controls for selectors, and help prevent duplication. An ebook approval plan is one of the options available when trying to integrate ebook content efficiently and effectively into a library's collection. So if you're looking to expand your ebook collection, an ebook approval plan could help you reach your goal.



Matthew Buckley has worked at the Alvin Sherman Library at Nova Southeastern University for the past 4 years and is currently the reference librarian and subject specialist for the arts and humanities. He holds an M.L.I.S. from Wayne State University and two B.A.s from Michigan State University. Send him a line at mbuckley@nova.edu.

Deborah Tritt is currently an instruction/reference librarian and assistant professor at the University of South Carolina-Aiken and formerly held the position of subject specialist for the social sciences at Nova Southeastern University's Alvin Sherman Library. Deborah holds an M.L.I.S. and an M.S. in Information Technology Management. She can be contacted at deborah@usca.edu.